Looking for Asian America
A Sociological Study of Contemporary Asian-American Identity
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Abstract/Introduction

While most people think of Asian migration to the United States as a recent trend, the history of Asians in America actually dates back to before America itself existed as a country. The earliest Asian migrants were Filipino sailors jumping ship in Spanish ports in the South. Today, Asian Americans are the fastest growing racial group in the country. But what does it mean in today’s America to identify as Asian-American? And what experiences shape that identity?

Interview Questions

What is an average day like for you? How does your identity as an Asian American affect or not affect your daily life?

How well do you feel you were educated in school in terms of Asian-American history? What can you tell me about Asian-American history?

How do you think your experience as an Asian American has been directly or indirectly influenced by this history?

Interview Process

Interviews were conducted with over sixty self-identified Asian Americans. I divided interviewees into two groups: experts in the Asian-American community and ordinary community members. The former group included artists, activists, and scholars whose work focuses on the Asian-American community. The latter group included all other interviewees, who may or may not have knowledge of Asian-American history and issues.

I interviewed subjects in seven cities across the United States. I used the 2010 United States Census to find the cities with the lowest and highest percentages of self-identified Asian Americans and selected a range of cities from those lists to include in my site visits and interviews. Cities visited are marked on the map to the left and include the following: Princeton, New York City, Denver, Colorado Springs, Houston, Austin, San Francisco, Honolulu, and Los Angeles.

Time and budget constraints meant that I had to keep my number of cities and interviews to a certain number and time frame. This meant that although I was able to interview individuals from across the country, I was not able to visit diverse a range of locations as I would have ideally preferred. With fewer practical constraints, visits to more regions of the U.S. (i.e. the South, the Midwest) would have allowed for greater breadth in subjects. I was also unable to interview any subjects of South Asian descent. The experiences shared by my interviewees are thus skewed towards those of East Asian Americans, who often have vastly different experiences than their South Asian American counterparts.

Limitations

Conclusions

The contemporary Asian-American experience is not a monolith but rather a multifaceted reflection of the diversity of those who identify as Asian American.

How Asian Americans identify themselves (to themselves and to others) and how much they prioritize that identity in their day to day lives and in their professional and personal pursuits can be influenced by a variety of factors including hometown diversity, education, familial history, and current geographic location.

As the Asian-American population grows, the contemporary Asian-American experience can be expected to shift with it.

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Facts

“Asian Americans are the highest-income, best-educated and fastest-growing racial group in the United States.”

“I Asians make up the largest share of recent immigrants.”

“... the total population of Asian Americans—foreign born and U.S. born, adults and children—was a record 18.2 million in 2011, or 5.8% of the total U.S. population, up from less than 1% in 1965.”

Methodology

I began with a literature review examining Asian-American history, politics, and activism, with an emphasis on readings focused on the mid-late twentieth century. Significant readings included Frank H. Wu’s Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White, and Gordon Chang’s Asian Americans and Politics: Perspectives, Experiences, Prospects.

Using the background gained from the literature review and guidance from my mentor, I wrote an Institutional Review Board-approved study protocol which I used to conduct informational interviews with Asian Americans across the country. In addition, I visited sites of historical import such as the Angel Island Immigration Station and academic and cultural resources such as the Houston Asian American Archives, Museum of Chinese in America, and the Chinese American Museum of Los Angeles.

Utilizing Adobe Premiere, I edited together the footage from interviews conducted with interviewees who consented to public usage of their footage. The finished product is a short documentary video highlighting themes and experiences I discovered during the interview process.

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